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ABSTRACT

Academic persistence at the University of Alabama in Birmingham (UAB) was studied from fall 1979 through spring 1983. Attention was directed to the school's graduation rate and correlations between sex, race, major, grade point average (GPA) and persistence. Of the 1,043 students who were beginning freshmen in 1979, the study sample consisted of 92 students, of whom 73 percent were white and 27 percent were black. Eighty-three percent were permanent residents of the local county. As of fall 1983, 33 percent of the beginning freshmen were active at UAB, and after 5 years, 14 percent of the sample had graduated. A majority of students were enrolled full-time during the first 2 years, but in the last 3 years more of the sample were part-time. Students in a well-defined study program, such as engineering, tended to have higher GPAs and higher persistence rates, while those who were unsure of their goals usually dropped out and had lower GPAs. Forty-eight percent of students with a GPA of 2.0-2.9 on a 4.0 scale had graduated or were persisting. In addition, financial aid seemed a prominent factor in persistence. Twenty-five percent of the students who had graduated or were enrolled in spring 1984 had taken time off for at least a term during the 5 years. Ways that the study could be enlarged are suggested. (SW)

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SOUTHERN ASSOCIATION FOR INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH

This paper was presented at the 1984 Annual Conference of the Southern Association for Institutional Research held in Little Rock, Arkansas, October 24-26, 1984. It was reviewed by the SAIR Publications Committee and was judged to be of interest and pertinent to others concerned with the research in higher education. This paper has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC collection of Conference Papers.

Richard D. Howard
President, SAIR

Attrition claims a great number of college students every year. The Carnegie Council proposes that about 40 percent of the initial enrollment of any four-year college will drop out. (Carnegie Council, 1980) This number has fallen in recent years and the decline is expected to continue. But there still exists the problem of large numbers of students who are lost from institutions of higher learning. A vast amount of research has been conducted in the last thirty years which has given insight into this problem. The research encompasses many approaches into the investigation of attrition. Methodology is discussed and critiqued, terminology questions are raised, numerous variables are considered, and yet little definitive solutions are proposed.

The problem of attrition studies at the urban institution is subject to the inconclusive findings of attrition research and to the peculiar characteristics of that type of institution. In this context, urban universities are those institutions which have come into existence primarily in the last twenty years. They are a product of the 1960's and 70's philosophy that everyone should have access to higher education. They are also a response to the realization that the masses of the population live in metropolitan areas and therefore the university has an obligation and an opportunity to function in and serve the city. And lastly, they are a response to the overwhelming numbers of the baby boom generation becoming college age.

Urban university enrollments have grown at phenomenal levels. This growth includes a very diverse group of students. Student ages are more widely varied and the average age is higher than on most traditional, residential campuses. Most of the students at urban universities work at least part-time and the vast majority are commuters. In fact, very little housing is provided for students. All of these characteristics illustrate the uniqueness of the urban university and give insight into the problems encountered when studying attrition rates at

these institutions.

The University of Alabama in Birmingham is an institution which was established as an autonomous campus in 1969. Since that time, it has experienced rapid growth. During the ten year period from Fall, 1969, through Fall, 1979, enrollment increased 164 percent. Solving problems that resulted from this rapid growth dominated the attention of University administrators, and some less pressing issues were neglected. Enrollment figures at the University have stabilized at the present, resulting in the need for inquiry into the attrition rate among its students. A pilot study was conducted to provide information and direction for further in-depth research of attrition at the University.

As mentioned previously, a significant amount of literature can be found in a review of attrition studies in higher education. Spady (1971) introduces the idea that personal attributes and sources of demands have key influence on withdrawal or persistence (i.e. continued enrollment) of students. Peng and Feters (1978) also propose that individual variables, such as background environment and personality, often have a distinct relationship in continued enrollment. Tinto (1975) presents a model which emphasizes the importance of integration into both the social and academic systems of an institution in its attrition rate. In a similar study, Terenzini and Pascarella (1977) support Tinto's theory.

There is limited published information on attrition studies at urban, nonresidential schools. Pascarella, Duby, Miller, and Rasher (1981) found that academic performance in the first quarter is more important than any pre-enrollment characteristic in student persistence. Greene (1982) proposes that it is the ability to "figure out the system" that is the primary factor in continuation.

Research has produced several suggestions for retaining students. Avakian,

MacKinney, and Allen (1982) studied attrition at an urban university and concluded that admission directors could use the results to identify students who are more likely to persist, and therefore increase the university's chances of retaining the student. Similarly, financial resources could be directed toward those who will persist. Research also shows that a guidance or counseling program would be beneficial because students with more clearly defined objectives persist more than those who are unsure of their goals (Greene, 1982). Other studies at urban institutions suggest that more research be conducted.

The University of Alabama in Birmingham (UAB) pilot study took the form of a descriptive study, covering the five year period from Fall, 1979, through Spring, 1983. A sample group of students was selected in an effort to determine what the graduation rate is at this institution, as well as to determine any correlations between sex, race, major, grade-point average and persistence in enrollment.

Original information was obtained from UAB's Fall, 1979, enrollment tapes. More detailed information was obtained from the students' Permanent Record Cards and the Student Accounting and Records System (STARS), a computerized student records system. Both sources were used because STARS was installed in Spring, 1982 and therefore does not include those students with no activity after Winter, 1982.

A ten percent random sample of the 1,043 students coded Beginning Freshmen in Fall, 1979, was selected. Beginning Freshmen are those students who have not completed any college coursework and have no College Level Examination Program (CLEP) credit. Due to improper coding and problems in some records, the final sample size was 92 students. Forty-five percent of these students were male and 55% were female. Seventy-three percent were white and 27% were black students. Eighty-three percent of the sample were permanent residents of the local county. This sample was fairly representative of the entire Beginning Freshmen class.

The information obtained on each student included their name, social security number, birthdate, ACT scores, race, sex, beginning and ending school and major, financial aid status, and each term in which there was some activity. They were tracked for the five year period Fall, 1979, through Spring, 1983, to determine if they enrolled in subsequent quarters, hours attempted, hours completed, grade points received, and if a degree was obtained. The data were stored on a separate disk file in order to facilitate comparisons. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to compute frequencies and tabulations.

The following table represents the percentage of students who dropped out of this institution after the time period indicated. Enrolled is defined as at least one attempted course hour for that year.

After Term:	Students never enrolled
Summer 1980	28.3%
Summer 1981	41.3%
Summer 1982	53.2%
Summer 1983	67.4%

As of Fall, 1983, 33% of the Beginning Freshmen were still active at UAB. After five years, 14% of the students in the sample had graduated. These students began graduating in the Winter, 1983 term, and have continued to graduate through Spring, 1984. In addition, 20% of the students are still persisting as of Spring, 1984 and are potential graduates. Six percent of those students who never enrolled after Summer 1980 never attempted any hours.

Several crosstabulations were completed with the following relationships determined. Although over 81% of the sample were the traditional age of college freshmen, a small number of older students were included in the sample. These older freshmen are still persisting, that is they were enrolled sometime during

the 1983-84 academic year. Also it was discovered that a majority of the students were enrolled full-time during the first two years, but in the last three years more of the sample were part-time students.

The crosstabulations of race and sex show a few distinct differences between the groups involved. The following tables indicate that males and females have very similar enrollment patterns until the 1982-83 academic year. Furthermore, a larger percentage of whites drop out during the first year. Enroll year is defined as the last year that the student attempted at least one hour of course work.

count row percent	1979-80	1980-81	1981-82	1982-83	1983-84	GRAD	Row Total
male	11 27.5	5 12.5	4 10.0	1 2.5	12 30.0	7 17.5	40 46.0
female	12 25.5	6 12.8	6 12.8	5 10.6	12 25.5	6 12.8	47 54.0

count row percent	1979-80	1980-81	1981-82	1982-83	1983-84	GRAD	Row Total
white	18 28.1	7 10.9	9 14.1	3 4.7	18 28.1	9 14.1	64 73.6
black	5 21.7	4 17.4	1 4.3	3 13.0	6 26.1	4 17.4	23 26.4

The grade point average (GPA) was determined in three separate categories -the 1979-80 GPA; the UAB courses only GPA; the cumulative GPA that includes transfer credits. Each GPA was compared to the enroll year, beginning school and major and ending school and major. The students with an end school of Nursing or Engineering had the highest rate of persistence, and Engineering and Humanities

had the highest percentage of students with a 3.0-3.9 cumulative GPA. Conversely, the Undecided and Freshmen Studies areas had the highest percentage of students with a GPA below a 2.0. These figures indicate that students in a well defined program of study, such as Engineering, tend to have higher grade point averages and to persist more. However, those who are unsure of their goals usually drop out and have lower grade point averages.

Forty-eight percent of the students with a GPA of 2.0-2.9 in 1979-80 have graduated or are still persisting. Of the students who had a GPA of 3.0-3.9 in 1979-80, 24% never enrolled after that year. Generally, the largest percentage of students who dropped out after the first year were from the lower and higher ends of the GPA scale. It could be assumed that those students with the higher GPA transferred to another institution. Those students with a GPA of 2.0-2.9 tend to continue at UAB and many graduate. In fact, 77% of those who have graduated had a 1979-80 GPA of 2.0-2.9.

Forty-six percent of the sample applied for financial aid at some point during their enrollment at UAB. Twenty-seven percent received some form of aid when applied. Of these that received aid, 19% received a degree, an additional 38% were enrolled in the last academic year, and 19% failed to show satisfactory academic progress. These findings tend to indicate that financial aid is a prominent factor in the study of attrition at this urban campus.

Another factor which must be considered when studying attrition is "stopping out". This term refers to those students who do not enroll in the institution in consecutive terms (excluding summers). Of the sample selected in this pilot study, 25% of the students who had graduated or were enrolled in Spring, 1984, were found to have "stopped out" for at least a term during the five years.

Because this was a limited pilot study, it is obvious that a larger, more

comprehensive investigation must be undertaken to more accurately define the attrition rate at UAB. There are several options available in enlarging this study. A survey of the students in the sample would provide additional information regarding their attendance and withdrawal from the University. But because of the lapse of time from the input of the demographic data, it is highly probable that many of the students would be difficult, if not impossible, to locate.

Another alternative is to expand the number of Beginning Freshmen in the study. Transfer students could also be included in the sample, as they have been in many attrition studies. This increased number would enhance the credibility of the tabulations.

The current research should lead to other studies at this institution. A parallel method could be used to study the attrition rate, after all student records in the sample are on STARS. This would make information more easily accessible and more reliable. Problems would exist though in that adequate background information and personal observations and goals of the students would be missing. This approach would require a wait of at least three more years and the need for answers is immediate.

Perhaps the best option involves a longitudinal study of Beginning Freshmen. The sample would be selected in the fall and appropriate questionnaires could be issued at selected intervals. A longitudinal study ensures that the greatest possible amount of information is obtained and analyzed. Several researchers have suggested this method as the most comprehensive and reliable source of information (Terenzini, 1982). Though once again, there would be a delay of several years before definite conclusions could be drawn.

The results of the current pilot study are valuable in that they give insight, though limited, into the attrition rate among students at UAB. They

suggest that those students enrolled in programs which are more structured tend to persist and graduate at higher levels. They also suggest that the student with a G.P.A. between 2.0 - 2.9 is more likely to continue at UAB. Indications such as these are helpful to academic planners and guidance counselors in structuring programs of study and targeting specific groups of students.

Though this study has not been definitive, it has revealed a general knowledge of the situation at UAB. The final result is much the same as that in other attrition studies, that is, further research must be conducted.

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